

6. THE WATERCOCK *GALLICREX CINEREA* IN KUTTANADU, KERALA

Kuttanadu, the rice bowl of Kerala, lies in the Alleppey and Kottayam districts of central Kerala, in the delta formed by the three rivers Pampa, Achencoil and Manimala, around the Vembanadu lake. The extensive paddy fields of Kuttanadu were once part of different lakes and lie below the main sea level. Farmers have constructed bunds around these fields and pump the water out for paddy cultivation.

The watercock *Gallix cinerea* (local name Neiykozhi) is a seasonal visitor to Kuttanadu, coming in large numbers and staying for two to three months between November and March. This is the season during which the paddy starts ripening. The birds are largely immatures. Even mature birds cannot be sexually distinguished since they are in non-breeding plumage.

It is not known from where these birds arrive; it may be from the north (Assam and Bengal). They come in at night, and during the day remain silent in the paddy fields in temporary day nests constructed with paddy. They are crepuscular. Rarely, they are seen flying slightly above the paddy for short distances.

Since they are very shy, they are never flushed even when the field is disturbed. Instead they skulk

and move silently to another area. Bird trappers use this to catch the birds easily. They stretch long nylon nets along the border of the field, then from the other end drive the birds towards the net, where they are trapped en masse. The birds are highly priced since their flesh is considered tasty. In the season, hundreds can be found on sale in the markets of Edathua, Changanacherry and Alleppey and in other parts of Kuttanadu like Kainakary, Kidangara, Pulinkunnu, Muttar etc. A kilogram of live bird (i.e. about 3-4 birds) costs Rs. 25 to 35 in the season.

The birds face severe threat in Kuttanadu. Each year thousands of them are caught and killed. Habitat destruction is another major problem. Use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides have made the fields unsuitable for the birds. It has been noticed that they do not rest in fields where systemic poisons like Furadan are applied. The change in the season of paddy cultivation has also affected them. As a result the number of these birds is decreasing each year. This is no doubt that the watercock would become locally extinct, if they continue to be killed at the present rate.

June 20, 1989

J. G. RAY

7. SIGHTING OF THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD *ARDEOTIS NIGRICEPS* VIGORS NEAR PUNE, MAHARASHTRA

On 17 March 1986, I visited Jejuri, a religious place about 45 km south-east of Pune via Saswad. At about 1230 hrs I was wandering over the fields around the town when I saw a pair of great Indian bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* under a half-cut tamarind tree. Whether both the birds were males or females or whether they were of different sexes, I could not differentiate. One bird was chasing the other. My appearance on the scene probably disturbed them, and they slowly started moving away from me and

ultimately flew away.

On 23 March, Tejas Gole and P. Gogate visited the area and found the birds around the same area, about 250 m away from where I had first sighted them. One of the birds was photographed. This is probably the only sight record of the bustard in Pune district during the last two or three decades.

August 2, 1989

SANJEEV B. NALAVADE

8. BREEDING OF CASPIAN TERN *HYDROPROGNE CASPIA* IN THE LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH, GUJARAT

While going through the Little Rann of Kutch Sanctuary in Gujarat on 23 December 1988, we were

told by the staff of the sanctuary who were accompanying us, that they had come across a site